

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: MAY 8, 2013

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: FAROLL HAMER, DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND ZONING

SUBJECT: CAPACITY FOR SMALL AREA PLANNING

On May 28, the City Council will consider for approval a long range planning work program for FY 2014 and beyond. Probably the biggest decision before Council is the selection of which small area plan to do next. Staff has recommended that the next plan be Old Town North, which would mean, once again, deferring Eisenhower West. The memo for the May 28 docket will go into detail about the reasons why those plans are needed and the consequences of putting one ahead of the other. The City Council has received communication from civic groups and other stakeholders who support scheduling the Old Town North Plan first and communication from those who support scheduling the Eisenhower West Plan first.

A natural question is: why not do both? The purpose of this memo is to discuss the capacity of the City for small area planning and why there isn't capacity to conduct two small area planning processes at the same time. It will also discuss, briefly, our recent practice to schedule small area plans for areas with immediate redevelopment pressure ahead of plans for areas with limited redevelopment pressure.

Capacity for Small Area Planning

The City's capacity for small area planning includes the capacity of all stakeholders – members of the public, elected and appointed public officials, and staff – to jointly work on small area plans. Many of these same participants are also engaged in related decision-making activities that help shape our city, including major and minor infrastructure projects, development cases, and other plan implementation activities.

As you know, Alexandria has a practice to follow small area plans with a coordinated implementation strategy. Planning and Zoning staff are participating, and often coordinating, the work to implement the plans, along with the involvement of the community. This approach has

many benefits, including maintaining the integrity of the planning process by ensuring that the community gets the improvements and amenities that were promised. We also know that it is just as important to have the community involved in plan implementation as in the plan itself – either because there are important details to decide, or there are adjustments that need to be made based on new information. Having planners involved in implementation also produces better plans and breaks down silos among departments. I also believe that, as important as plans are, they do not benefit the City until or unless they are implemented.

Of course, a consequence of this approach is that, with every new plan that is approved, we increase the amount of P&Z staff time that must be allocated to plan implementation. With the approval of the North Potomac Yard Plan, we reached a kind of “tipping point” where we no longer have the capacity to conduct two small area plans simultaneously and engage in all of the necessary implementation work for the plans already adopted.

For FY 2014, major implementation work will occur on the Waterfront, North Potomac Yard (including the Metrorail station), Beauregard, Braddock, Arlandria, and Landmark. We’ll be wrapping up and implementing the results of *What’s Next Alexandria*. We’re co-leading the Long Range Education Facilities Plan with ACPS staff which, while not a small area plan, is a significant planning effort with a Citywide impact. We’ll be supporting planning work led by other departments, including the Bicycle Master Plan and the Public Art Master Plan. And we’re also working on King Street retail, wayfinding, and forecasting and demographics.

All of these projects, and many more, will have public meetings to provide information, gather feedback, and to respond to feedback. There will be docket items on City boards, commissions, and the City Council itself. In the *What’s Next Alexandria* dialogues, we’ve heard that many in the community are overwhelmed by the volume of public meetings and recommend we hold a smaller number of more effective meetings with broader outreach. I agree with that idea, but note that doing so will not reduce staff time spent on a project.

I think it is helpful to remember that the staff capacity issue isn’t limited to the number of Planning & Zoning staff available – the staff team working small area plans includes staff from T&ES, RPCA, Housing, OHA, AEDP, and others – and there isn’t capacity in these departments to support two small area plans at the same time.

There is potential for developer or landowner financial support of small area planning – usually in the form of funds to reduce the costs for outside technical assistance, such as traffic and market studies. This is helpful, but doesn’t address the staff and community capacity issue.

Priorities for Small Area Planning

When developing the long range planning schedule, it has been the City's practice to give priority to plans in areas seeing immediate development pressure. Braddock Metro Station is a particularly good case of this – since the plan was completed in 2008, the area has been transformed by the six major projects that are completed or under construction, with a total of approximately 1,500 dwelling units and 35,000 square feet of retail, and planning for the park is underway. We have started to see the benefits of the Landmark/Van Dorn plan with new development on Picket Street and the first phase of a mixed-use mall site. The Waterfront is more than a case of development pressure – we saw a whole range of near-term benefits to the City that would result from having that plan in place.

A reason for this practice is that it is very much in the City's interest to have a plan in place prior to approving redevelopment. The latest small area plans identify the public facilities and amenities that are desired by the public and needed by the redevelopment. They also estimate costs and identify a funding strategy, so that when development is approved, it is contributing in a systematic way to the amenities and infrastructure in the plan.

Old Town North is a location where there is immediate market demand. Some development projects have been approved and are under construction, others are just being approved, and a number of other development proposals are coming soon. The alternative to creating a plan for Old Town North would be to allow piecemeal rezonings that are not guided by an overarching set of principles created by the community (or to defer potentially desirable redevelopment projects while we re-plan an area that does not have an active development proposed).

People have pointed out that plans, in and of themselves, can stimulate redevelopment interest. That's true to a degree, and explains why all of our proposed plans are important, but not necessarily as urgently needed as plans for areas where market redevelopment pressure is high.

It should also be pointed out that in discussions with the stakeholders regarding the Eisenhower West plan, the issue of timing has been raised. Staff initially proposed that the transportation planning for Eisenhower West should come first, as there is a long lead time, then pause for the Old Town North process, and then conclude with the land use planning in 2015-2016. It now appears that there is a preference for keeping the transportation and land use work together, such that the Eisenhower West effort would begin in early 2016 with the transportation study and then continue straight through 2016, to better integrate transportation and land use and to maintain the momentum that's so important for community engagement process.

cc: Mark Jinks, Deputy City Manager
Rich Baier, Transportation and Environmental Services
Jim Spengler, Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities

John Catlett, Department of Code Administration
Mildrilyn Davis, Office of Housing
Lance Mallamo, Office of Historic Alexandria